

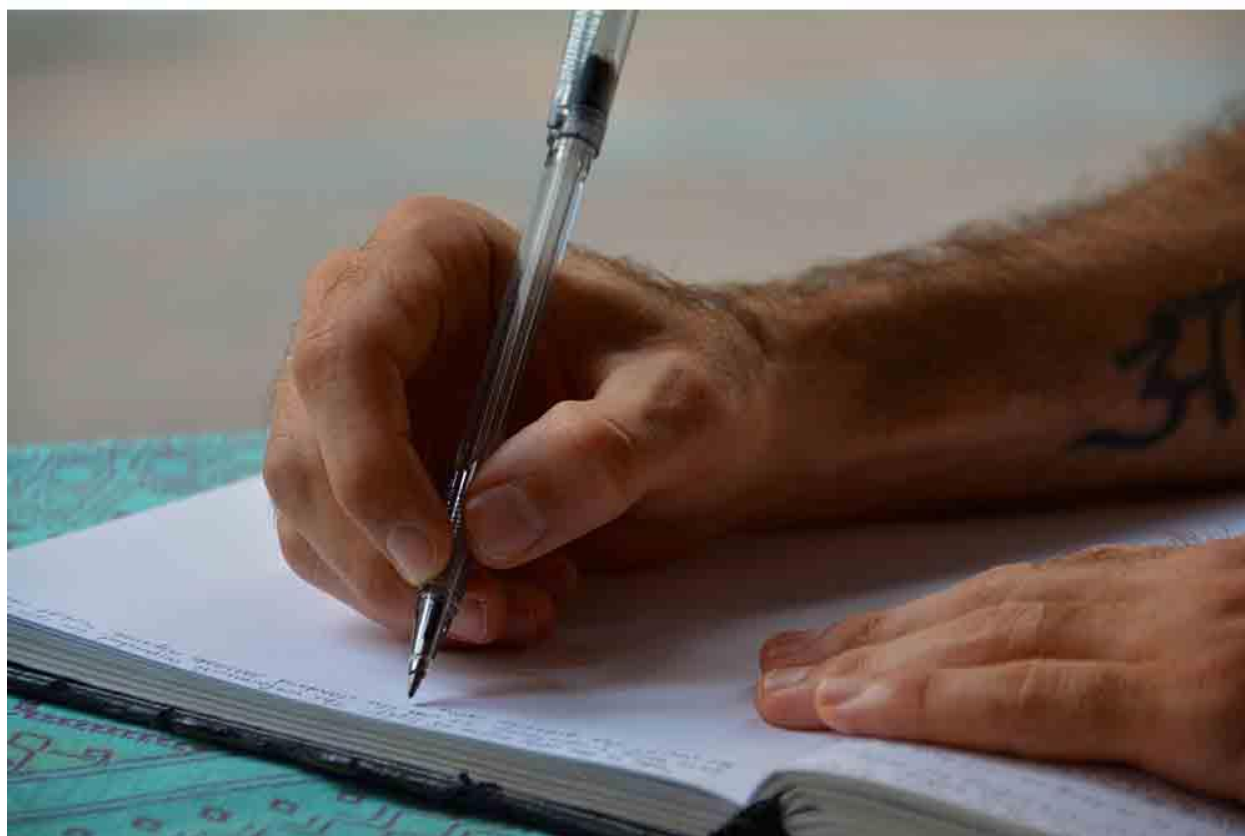
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The Influence of Pyrrhonian Skepticism and Madhyamaka Buddhism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness

Abstract

This article explores the influences of Pyrrhonian Skepticism and Madhyamaka school of Buddhist thought and crafts a new response to Conrad's diverse themes in 'Heart of Darkness'. Pyrrho's thoughts have influenced dramatists in the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean age but however Pyrrhonian skepticism has never resulted in an explicit, monumental movement sweeping over entire Europe. A careful interrelatedness between East and West philosophy, an investigation of the Christianization of Pyrrhonism (after its revival in the 16th/17th centuries) and its distinct similarity to the principles of the Madhyamaka school of thought can help us to identify the unique presence of components of Greek and Buddhist philosophy in Conrad's novella. It helps one to analyse 'Heart of Darkness' in a new, philosophical light,

Key Words : Pyrrhonian skepticism, Madhyamaka, heart of darkness, emptiness, suffering, rationality, irrationality, determinate assumption, indeterminacy.

1. Introduction:

The uniqueness of Conrad lies in the fact that he has been analysed in enchanted, dis - enchanted and re - enchanted ways. Scholars have generally analysed Conrad's works through the classical vocabularies of determinate assumptions that is to say conventions of determination which lead to conventional understanding. With time, new forms of determinate assumption or new forms of understanding have to be and have been produced as guiding concepts of analysis critiquing forms of socio-political, socio ideological implementation and practice [1].

The turbulence in the late 19th century was phenomenal with political, economic, sociological and religious changes seen practically everywhere. Amidst such chaos of dogmatisms and ill- conceived plans of the politically volatile times the silent but certain presence of ancient scepticism in its rawness or Christianized glory influenced literature re energising it.

The doxographer Diogenes Laertius in his ' Lives of Great Philosophers ' speaks of Pyrrho's [2] arrival in India around 4th century CE. In India, he met several Indian sages and may have been influenced by early Buddhist doctrines that were the seeds of the subsequent Mahayana school of thought in a structured form. After his return to Greece, Pyrrho led an austere life of the religious ascetics he had observed in India and like them lived a detached life. This transcultural overlap is seen prominently in the doctrines of Pyrrhonian Skepticism and Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka school of Buddhist thought .

In Sextus Empericus's writings [3] on Pyrrho's doctrines (Pyrrho himself did not leave any written record of his doctrines), Pyrrho is known to have said : ' Our senses and our language cannot be trusted , they cannot communicate truth , they cannot communicate falsity '

According to Pyrrho ,the best way to lead a life is to suspend judgement and live according to reality as it appears . This neutral position of accepting things as they appear echoes the famous tetralemma by the Indian Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna .

Stephen Batchelor phrases Nagarjuna's tetralemma as

‘We need to recognise that things no more are than they are not they neither are and are not and they neither 'are ' nor ' not are ' [4].

The singular similarity between the two schools of thought rests on the fact that the existence of two contrary beliefs is highly possible and suspending judgement can only lead to a state of untroubled existence.

Nagarjuna[5] is surely one of the most difficult philosophers to interpret in any tradition ,his texts being terse and cryptic and because he was not averse to paradox or contradiction . The depth and beauty of his thoughts , and the austere beauty of his philosophy has not only made him unparalleled in the Mahayana Buddhist world but has exceeded in the tradition the influence of any single Western Philosopher . While Nagarjuna may perplex, his texts may defy exegesis anyone who spends time with Nagarjuna's thoughts inevitably develops a deep respect for this master philosopher [6].

In this article, Pyrrhonian Skepticism and Madhyamaka school of Buddhist have been explored thought to craft a new response to Conrad's themes of emptiness, suffering, rationality, irrationality and duty and its appeal diagnosed. Conrad's interweaving of philosophical skepticism in 'Heart of Darkness', has been examined thereby placing the writer in a tradition that includes Nagarjuna and Pyrrho and Descartes.

2. East west dialogue:

A) Academic Skepticism; Pyrrhonian Skepticism

B) Influence Of Madhyamaka On Pyrrhonian Thought

If one subdivides Ancient Skepticism into two categories then under Academic Skepticism falls Cicero and the members of Aristotle's Academy .The alternate school is the Pyrrhonian school of thought founded by Pyrrho and popularized by the biographer Diogenes Laertius and through the writings of Sextus Empiricus .

Aristotelian logic holds the belief that no contrasting truths can exist simultaneously that is the notion nothing can both be and not be. On the other hand, Pyrrhonian skepticism relates that a pair of contrary truths is perfectly acceptable and it is by suspension of judgement that a state of ataraxia * is reached. The commitment to intellectual integrity is not supreme for the Pyrrhonians as it is for the Academic Skeptics . The Pyrrhonians subordinate it to their therapeutic enterprise [7].

Pyrrho may have been influenced by early Buddhist doctrines which subsequently formed the Mahayana school of thought in a systematic form. In recent times, there are quite a few scholar-logicians who do emphasize that the Greeks were the ones to introduce the concept of dialectics in Buddhist thought. However the criticism against them is that their rigid adherence to Aristotelian categorisation leads them to lack understanding the contextual considerations.

Secondly, the Buddha had provisioned the structure and seeds of the Mahayana thought so the presence of a structured form, the methods along with the thoughts were present in those discussions. These discussions provide inferential structure, scope and awareness, Aristotelian syllogistic formalisation and Platonic dialectic. So all such theories are contingent on contemporary interpretation creating their own retrojective context of fulfilment.

On the basis of this it can be said that the Greeks having influenced the Buddhists doctrines is like the Greek concept of the atom being introduced to a land where the Buddha has already spoken about nuclear reactors .

The one serious objection to Pyrrho down the ages is that apparently his doctrine is not livable and it is practically impossible to live a life without belief . The first obstacle is that other than the lone figure of Sextus Empericus (200 CE) and quite a few eminent Italians including Savaronola and the Elder and Younger De Mirandello s , there is no large number of 'data set ' to prove the livability of Pyrrho's doctrine .

At the outset, let us consider how Pyrrhonian Skepticism is different from the skepticism known today. The word 'skeptikoi ' means someone who investigates and not someone who doubts. Pyrrhonian Skeptics are therefore to be contrasted with the Academic Skeptics who dogmatically claim that the true nature of things is wholly unknowable and the Dogmatists who claim that they have discovered the true nature of things. Pyrrhonists continue to investigate and finding no satisfactory answers they are led to suspend belief which induces tranquillity they set out to find in the first place. Now the belief in question is based on Hellenistic epistemology. The Stoics and the Epicureans consider belief to be a kind of judgement or acceptance. Sextus however implies that a Pyrrhonic skeptic acts, lives and speaks without dogmatic assent and by simply observing the diversities that daily life offers but observes those without judgement.

If the similarities of Pyrrhonian doctrine are applied to Madhyamaka School of teaching, one can demonstrate its viability. In this context, if the Madhyamikas are regarded as the ' honorary Pyrrhonians ' then there will be a larger data set of actual Pyrrhonian skeptics than the sole figure of Sextus Empericus and a handful of others down the ages.

The Madhyamaka school of Buddhist thought provides theoretical support for Sextus's defences of the livability of Pyrrhonism . The Madhyamaka is also a lived practice in Tibetan Buddhism. Other than the theoretical support, the Mahyamikas also provide the emperical support to the livability of Pyrrhonism .

After the huge revival of Pyrrhonian skepticism in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, there was a sudden lull. Pyrrhonian skepticism never resulted in an explicit movement but subtly led to the development of a major strand of modern philosophical thought. However, for those who have suffered the birth pangs of modern thought, Pyrrhonism appears as the *bete noire* of the new philosophy, a haunting spectre of modern European philosophy.

From the reactionary responses of the Jansenists against Molinism in the early 17th century to Shestov's resistance till the arrival of Kantian Enlightenment in Russia in the late 19th century, Pyrrhonian skepticism along with Academic skepticism was reconstructed in terms of Christian doctrines and used against major secular philosophers who posed threats to religion [8].

3. THE PYRRHONIAN METHOD AND CONRAD'S WAY:

a) THE PYRRHONIAN METHOD:

Now, therefore what is Pyrrhonian Skepticism and its components and how are they combined [9]?

The five components in order are

1. Modes
2. Isosthenia
3. Epoche`
4. Ataraxia
5. Eudaemonia.

The Modes are the form of argumentation especially the ten of Anesidemus and the five of Agrippa. These are the resources that the skeptic uses to balance the reasons pro and con with regard to any given propositional claim or question. The aim is to bring about isosthenia or equipollence with respect to any such proposition. "P " for any given Subject

and time. As a result the subject will be rationally justified neither in believing nor in disbelieving that p.

Isosthenia leads to epoche `that is equipollence leads to suspension of judgement and belief.

Epoche ` in turn leads to ataraxia or tranquillity.

Ataraxia is a state of bliss and is a component of eudaemonia.

Eudaemonia is true happiness.

(Ernest Sosa : Pyrrhonian Skepticism and the Human Agency) .

This schema, articulates an approach to alleviate inner anxiety produced by the futility of locating specific answers to the questions posed in the novella.

According to Sextus Empericus , Pyrrhonian skeptics aim to alleviate a state of anxiety by suspending judgement on all propositions - 'the non -evident propositions ' Pyrrhonists are able to suspend judgement by employing methods or ' modes ' of opposition which involve marshalling consideration for both for and against the proposition in such a way that the case for and against are' equally convincing . '. Suspension of judgement and tranquillity follow as natural result.

Similarly, the Three Patterns of Reasoning as identified in Agrippa's Trilemma exhaust the logical alternatives and correspond to the modern position of Ininitism , Foundationalism and Coherentism

(Frogelin 1994 , Chapter 6 , Williams 1999 , Klein 1999)

INFINITISM is a view that an infinite and non - repeating series of reasons can properly convince.

FOUNDATIONALISM is the view that finite and non-repeating series of reasons can convince properly.

COHERENTISM: is the view that circular sets of reasons can properly convince.

None of these patterns convince Pyrronists so they suspend judgement.

The Agrippa Trilemma repeatedly occurs in Sextus's OUTLINES: The Pyrrhonist relies heavily on it:

There is a dispute among the Dogmatics for some say that some things are true, and some that nothing is true.. And it is not possible to decide the dispute for if you say that some things are true, you will not be found convincing. If you say it without proof because of the dispute and if you actually want to bring a proof, then if you confess your proof is false you will be unconvincing. While if you say that the proof is true you fall into reciprocal arguing and in addition you will be asked for a proof of the fact that it is true -and another proof for that and so ad infinitum and it is impossible to prove infinitely many things. Therefore it is impossible to know that some things are true,. '(PH ii, 85)

b) CONRAD AND PYRRHONIAN/MADHYAMAKA THOUGHT:

On the basis of the above Pyrrhonian methods, Conrad has been placed. One realises that the uniqueness in Conrad's multifarious literary and cultural inheritance makes it difficult to locate him securely in the dominant tradition of the British Novel. In the Heart of Darkness novella, Marlow, the 32 year old sailor is presented as a 'meditating Buddha' but the similarity does not end there. Through his explorations of 'the blank spaces' on the map, his journey up the Congo proves to him the validity of the two contrary beliefs and it is his Pyrrhonic skepticism of suspending judgement regarding 'the darkness' present in humans and what this 'darkness' is capable of.

The 'ataraxia' here is the sense of untroubled calm that makes Marlow relate the truth of the presence of this darkness to the men aboard the Nellie to share with them what he has learnt about the human heart.

The stage of 'ataraxia' gives way to the Pyrrhonic stage of Eudaemonia or the way of achieving a life of wisdom to flourish and live meaningfully. Marlow's character follows the

Pyrrhonian skeptic's method of analysing, reaching the conclusion of the prevalence of contrariness, suspending judgement and ultimately flourishing as a wise man whom his mates aboard the ship look up to. In this sense, he is a living example of Pyrrhonian thought.

The sense of isolation and emptiness in Conrad's characters which stemmed from the 19TH / 20th century's snowballing into the haunting spectre of world wars, the holocaust which led to a rising sense of resigned but calm acceptance radically corrodes the undersides of everything Conrad values ultimately resulting in a kind of suspension of judgement and calm resignation ' Anything better than black depression'

'I am thus coming back to the world. Yet that isn't exactly it. It's very much like coming out of one little hell into another. One can't help that feeling. I am glad enough to have changed one hell for another, for I do not feel either helpless or hopeless. On the contrary, there is a sort of confidence -but indeed it may be only the sign of an incipient softening of the brain. However, I am glad enough to feed it on any terms. Anything better than black depression'

(Under Western Eyes)

Kurtz - the most enigmatic character in 20th century literature originally wished to travel to Africa specifically to complete the great acts of

'humanizing, improving , instructing '

An exaggeration of the deepest impulses everywhere, Kurtz's sufferings and a sense of emptiness that he speaks about reveals Conrad's fairly systematic and definite sense of symmetry. As a theory of production, it is a causal theory and structured inferentially.

Conrad is therefore basically ' deconstructing ' the production of suffering but also using it as a preliminary step of its production that is both personal and worldly , psychological and ontological , in order to give it a logical form in concrete ways that are

simple , undeniably relevant and persuasive .Conrad then abstracts or withdraws from that production

This nature of abstraction, withdrawal from production, has been explored by the Buddha and the Madhyamaka school of Buddhist thought and doctrine. What is important is the structures and ranges of the easy, esoteric discernment of the doctrines and that the statements have to be looked at and compared on a case by case basis

And of the suffering , the horrors in 'Heart of Darkness ',as Conrad points to Kurtz's ability to function as a 'choice of nightmares ' for Marlow in his emptiness he becomes a cipher upon which other things can be projected .

The concept of 'emptiness ' in Conrad's novella stems also from the fact that sincerity and trustworthiness delude as in Lord Jim , or sincere actions may bring about unforeseen disaster as in Charles Gould or even that cautiously refraining from actions may result in harmful consequences as in Heyst . Conrad's way to reveal about this emptiness is to deconstruct the opposition between for example in Heyst's 'being is ' and ' being is not ' (active). If it is considered the emptiness to be a ' thing ' the selective, ontological indication of is or isn't is explored from all its structural directions, each of which becomes a powerful convention but is not identified exclusively with an absolute.

' And outside the silent wilderness surrounding the cleared speck on the earth struck me as something great and invincible like evil or truth , waiting for me '

(HEART OF DARKNESS)

'In a few days the Eldorado Expedition went into patient wilderness that closed upon it as the sea closes over a diver. Long afterwards the news came that all the donkeys were dead. I know nothing as to the fate of the less valuable animals. They no doubt like the rest of us, found what they deserved. I did not enquire' .

(HEART OF DARKNESS)'

'The brown current ran swiftly out of the heart of darkness, bearing us down towards the sea with twice the speed of our upward progress: and Kurtz's life was running swiftly too, ebbing, ebbing out of his heart into the sea of inexorable time ... I saw the time approaching when I would be left alone of the party of 'unsound method '

(HEART OF DARKNESS)

Our error in interpreting Conrad as infusing his characters with a sense of emptiness would be erroneous if one considers emptiness to be some kind of determinate , ontological , indication , and the respective semantic and dialectical regimes that might be associated with such ontological indication . This can be a tricky point as one has to work through each step, carefully in order to gain an appreciation of the systemacity at work with regard to the metaphysical possibilities at play.

Conrad's idea of emptiness has relevance with Nagarjuna's doctrines on emptiness and is dependent upon the very phenomenon which by their emptiness constitute interdependent existence. Without there being a context or phenomenon to be empty, there is no emptiness. Emptiness is a commonly shared, universal quality, not a privately owned isolated thing.

One can now consider the concept of duty and the concept of rights. The concepts are subsumed by higher injunctional complicity. If duty constitutes one's obligation to a far greater framework or context, whether theological or social, the concepts of rights constitute obligation to the individual, the so called 'thinking subject ' that Strauss mentions.

This movement is obvious a movement of mediation and certitude. When the theological certitude constituted frameworks of application, mediation was not problematic because theological frameworks were sufficiently intercursive to guide most activities in life. But as far as cosmology was concerned, those theological frameworks became insufficient. In the process, reason and science began to displace those frameworks and new sources of certitude were sought. Thus the frameworks of rationality and scientific experimentation,

together with judgements of selective comparison produced the methodology of doubt, of what is known as Cartesian doubt [10]. However Descartes had written

‘In so far as the sciences borrow their principles from philosophy, I considered that nothing solid could be built on such shifting foundations.’

Three hundred years later Heisenberg wrote [11] that the foundations of science, the very edifice of Descartes was shifting.

Even Einstein in his Autobiography mentioned’

‘ It was as if the ground had been pulled out from under one , with no firm foundation to be seen anywhere , upon which one could have built ’

The same indeterminate sense of a lack of firm foundation is seen in ‘ Heart of Darkness’

‘It was unearthly and the men were - . No, they were not inhuman, well, you know that was the worst of it - the suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity - like yours - the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes. It was ugly enough but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise , a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you - you so remote from the night of first ages - could comprehend . And why not? ’

Conrad proves through Kurtz how the 'building blocks ‘, the firm foundations were shifting. Every concept has a limited range of applicability, an approximate understanding of nature or life. Conrad refers here that one errs while assuming a kind of monolithic, exclusive relation between reason, truth and assertion. Rational economy of truth and their positing necessarily function dualistically. If there is no possibility of the irrational, the false, the lack of assertion, then the sense of the rational cannot function. There would be no need for the

rational anyway. It is possible to call all of that rational but it is equally possible to call it irrational. Strictly speaking, such possibility would be contingent, an *aporia*, a kind of conditioned *aporia*. That specifically means that it is conditioned by prior assumptions and distributions of what constitutes the 'rational' and 'the irrational'. And these assumed conditions occur in the language of determination, that the language of determination is itself the systematic production of various types of identity contingent on such systematic determination. If one compares Nagarjuna's idea of rationalism one sees that he is aware of those conventions and that the implications of those conditions can exceed the usual presuppositions of that convention.

4. Conclusion:

In this present article, it has been established that Pyrrhonian skepticism and Madhyama influenced Conrad in his novella, 'Heart of Darkness'. He has like the Pyrrhonists and the Madhyamikas spoken in it about a notion of reality which is the notion of determinate realisation; of determinate identity; of determinations of presence and absence; but then has gone beyond it and sought to enable an understanding beyond such determinations and conditions, an understanding that is not exhausted by the conventions of determinism. At the same time, Conrad's novella brings to the forefront that if there is no distribution of irrationality, then reason just becomes an unlimited, pan-substantialism and thereby meaningless. His novella is therefore a mosaic of interlocking theories, multileveled, and interrelated fabric of what is known as reality.

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